

Dear Friends:

This week, members of the General Assembly returned to Columbia to attend to matters affecting all of us as South Carolina citizens. The 2008 legislative session holds both tremendous challenge and great promise.

Legislators will address several issues that are critical to our efforts to reform our public schools. Topping that list is public school choice. A bill sponsored by Lexington County Republican Ted Pitts would establish public school choice committees in the state's local school districts. These committees would create new curriculum choices at the elementary, middle, and high school levels within two years.

Unlike similar legislation passed by bipartisan majorities last year in the House and Senate – but vetoed by Governor Mark Sanford – the new legislation would not mandate cross-district transfers. Instead, each district's public school choice committee would adopt a proposal for at least one cross-district choice within three years and present that proposal to its local school board. Implementation would be at the discretion of local school boards.

Other key issues the legislative body is expected to consider include:

- Revising the Educational Accountability Act, reducing the burden of testing on teachers in science and social studies;
- Recommending a funding system that provides a quality 21<sup>st</sup> century education for all South Carolina students;
- Creating a School Facilities Infrastructure Bank to assist districts with building and renovation projects; and
- Expanding four-year-old kindergarten to serve all at-risk students.

Every South Carolinian – especially teachers – can play a major role in shaping our education system by just becoming actively involved in the political and legislative process. During my election in 2006, I saw firsthand the importance of political participation. My election victory was one of the narrowest in state history, and a large part of that victory was due to voter turnout among educators, our state's "sleeping giant."

As I travel the state, I am often asked what others can do to help improve our schools. There are many opportunities available across our state. But if we want systemic, dramatic change, it must begin at the top with letting our voices be heard. If history has taught us anything, we've learned that things only change in South Carolina when the people ask the General Assembly to make it happen.

Integral to change is the involvement of students. In November, I addressed the South Carolina Student Legislature, a group of college students learning about the legislative process by submitting and arguing their own bills. This, along with groups such as the

South Carolina State Student Association and Youth-in-Government, engages college and high school students in learning about and advocating for issues important to their lives. Of course, participation and learning are not limited to secondary and higher education. All of our students have a stake in the outcome of these reforms—from seniors ready for graduation to elementary students. Our young people can let their legislators know about the need for better facilities, great teachers, and innovative programs. English and social studies classes write letters and invite legislators to speak to their classes.

Just because someone may not be of voting age, does not mean he or she is unable to affect government. Even students who cannot vote still have the ears of people who can. In the past, children and teenage children have accurately predicted presidential elections, a link attributed to shared views between children and parents. If this is true, perhaps instead of parents imprinting upon their children, the children could influence parents and persuade them to join in our efforts for reform or vote for those leaders who will do so.

Real educational progress is not a partisan issue or an age issue. Everyone's voice needs to be heard. Together, we can make a difference and ensure that success becomes a reality for all of our students.

Happy New Year!

Jim Rex  
State Superintendent of Education